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FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 0000
AMEMBASSY LUSAKA
INFO AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN
AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG
AMCONSUL DURBAN
AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM
AMEMBASSY GABORONE
AMEMBASSY HARARE
AMEMBASSY MBABANE
AMEMBASSY MAPUTO
AMEMBASSY MASERU
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L PRETORIA 17012

AF FOR ASSISTANT SECRETARY CROCKER FROM AMBASSADOR PERKINS

E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR

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SUBJECT: MBEKI'S RELEASE -- WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. I BELIEVE THAT THE RELEASE OF GOVAN MBEKI SHOULD BE SEEN AS A SIGNIFICANT EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT TO LOOSEN UP THE POLITICAL GRIDLOCK IN THE COUNTRY ON THE KEY ISSUE OF BLACK/WHITE DIALOGUE. I SUSPECT, HOWEVER, THAT THE GESTURE AND THE OTHER RELEASES WHICH WE HOPE WILL OCCUR IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS ARE AIMED MORE AT DRAWING MODERATE INTERNAL BLACK LEADERS INTO A DIALOGUE, RATHER THAN AT ENGAGING THE EXTERNAL ANC. SIMPLE HUMANITARIAN AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS, I.E., THE POSSIBLE DEATH IN PRISON OF AGED ANC PARTIARCHS, ALSO PLAYED A ROLE IN PRETORIA'S GAMBIT.

THE HUMANITARIAN ANGLE

13. DFA DIRECTOR GENERAL NIEL VAN HEERDEN TOLD US YESTERDAY JUST BEFORE MBEKI'S RELEASE THAT TO SOME EXTENT P.W. BOTH'S DECISION SHOULD BE SEEN AS SOMETHING "FROM ONE OLD MAN TO ANOTHER." VAN HEERDEN SAID THAT IN THE NOVEMBER 4 SAG SESSION WHICH FINALIZED THE DECISION, P.W. SAID THE MAN IS SEVENTY SEVEN YEARS OLD AND IN GOOD HEALTH FOR A MAN THAT AGE, BUT HE IS NOT A YOUNG MAN. P.W., IN VAN HEERDEN'S VIEW, SEEMED TO BE Musing OVER HIS OWN CIRCUMSTANCES IN THE TWILIGHT YEARS OF HIS LIFE.

14. VAN HEERDEN SAID THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO ARGUMENT ABOUT THE UNCONDITIONAL NATURE OF MBEKI'S RELEASE. THERE WAS ALSO GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT, IF ALL WENT WELL, THIS WOULD BE ONLY THE FIRST STEP IN A PROCESS INVOLVING THE FREEING OF MORE ANC PRISONERS OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS. HE DID NOT SPECIFICALLY MENTION MANDELA BUT OUR ASSUMPTION IS THAT HE WOULD BE THE FINAL ACT IN THE PROCESS.

THE POLITICAL ANGLE

15. VAN HEERDEN STRESSED THAT IN A BROADER CONTEXT THE GOVERNMENT IS WELL AWARE THAT THE SITUATION IS "TUMBLING HEAD OVER HEELS TOWARD SOME KIND OF CATASTROPHE. A GESTURE OF SOME SORT WAS NEEDED TO BREAK UP THE MOMENTUM AND BRING PEOPLE AROUND TO THE NEED TO TALK.

16. CENTRAL TO THIS CONTEXT IN MY VIEW IS THE PERCEPTION INSIDE THE SAG, RECENTLY EXPRESSED TO ME BY STOFFEL VAN DER MERWE, THAT CREDIBLE BLACK LEADERS INSIDE SOUTH AFRICA SUCH AS BUTHELEZI HAVE PAINTED THEMSELVES INTO A CORNER BY REFUSING TO NEGOTIATE WITH PRETORIA UNTIL THE POOLSMORE/ROBBEN ISLAND

GOVERNMENT HAS NO CHOICE BUT TO MEET THAT CONDITION.
HOWEVER, IN DOING SO, THERE IS NO INTENTION AT THIS
STAGE TO DEAL WITH THE LUSAKA AND.

17. I WOULD SERIOUSLY DOUBT THAT STOFFEL HAS ANY
ILLUSIONS ABOUT AN IMPENDING SEA OF CHANGE IN BLACK
REJECTION OF CHRIS HEUNIS' NATIONAL COUNCIL.
HOWEVER, IN PLAYING A LONGER TERM GAME VIS A VIS
INTERNAL BLACK POLITICAL FIGURES, THE SAG MUST FEEL
IT MAY NOW BE ABLE TO MOVE A FEW PIECES IN THE RIGHT
DIRECTION. IN THAT CONNECTION, INFORMATION DUPUTY
DIRECTOR DAVID STEWART REMARKED TO US EARLIER THIS
WEEK THAT WHILE THE GOVERNMENT IS OPERATING FROM A
POSITION OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH, AT SOME STAGE A
POLITICAL DIALOGUE MUST TAKE PLACE, "IF NOT IN THE
NATIONAL COUNCIL, THEN IN WHATEVER FORUM FOLLOWS IT
OR WHATEVER COMES AFTER THAT."

OUR REACTION

18. IN SUM, WE SHOULD HEARTILY WELCOME MBEKI'S
RELEASE AS WE HAVE DONE AND GENTLY PRESS THE SAG TO
FOLLOW UP WITH OTHER PRISONERS IN THE MONTHS AHEAD.
(AT THE SAME TIME, WE MIGHT QUIETLY URGE THE ANC NOT
TO CROW VICTORY TOO LOUDLY.) HOWEVER, WE SHOULD HAVE
NO ILLUSION THAT THIS PARTICULAR SAG STRATEGY --
ASIDE FROM ATTEMPTING TO CLAIM SOME HIGH GROUND -- IS
IN A SENSE AIMED AT A NEAR TERM SAG/ANC DIALOGUE.

PERKINS

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